

THE CHANNEL KEEPS IT · CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Chapter Ten of The Channel Keeps It

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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Chapter Ten of The Channel Keeps It. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-channel-keeps-it (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989022).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Most of what goes wrong with a gift economy goes wrong in a room. Not in the design, which can be careful, but in the meeting where the design is explained to someone who did not take part in it and has reasons to doubt it. The board member who wants a return on investment. The union representative who has seen generosity used before as a prelude to cuts. The partner firm that suspects it is being asked for something for nothing. The colleague who thinks the whole idea is soft. The family member who hears a proposal about money and gifts as a judgement on how the family has been living. Each of these people is, in a sense, right to be wary. Chapter 3 showed that the gift can dominate, that it can be used to close a line rather than open one, and that the house's own book overclaimed on the chemistry of trust. A sceptic who has noticed any of these things has noticed something real. The conversations in this chapter start from that fact. They do not try to win. They try to say what is true, in the order the other person needs to hear it, and to leave the line open.

CHAPTER TEN

The Hard Conversations

Why this chapter has scripts

Most of what goes wrong with a gift economy goes wrong in a room. Not in the design, which can be careful, but in the meeting where the design is explained to someone who did not take part in it and has reasons to doubt it. The board member who wants a return on investment. The union representative who has seen generosity used before as a prelude to cuts. The partner firm that suspects it is being asked for something for nothing. The colleague who thinks the whole idea is soft. The family member who hears a proposal about money and gifts as a judgement on how the family has been living.

Each of these people is, in a sense, right to be wary. Chapter 3 showed that the gift can dominate, that it can be used to close a line rather than open one, and that the house's own book overclaimed on the chemistry of trust. A sceptic who has noticed any of these things has noticed something real. The conversations in this chapter start from that fact. They do not try to win. They try to say what is true, in the order the other person needs to hear it, and to leave the line open.

The scripts are offered as shapes, not texts to be recited. Read them aloud once, then put them into your own words.

The principle beneath every script

In 1960 the sociologist Alvin Gouldner published a paper called "The Norm of Reciprocity", arguing that a norm requiring people to help those who have helped them, and not to harm them, is found across cultures and is one of the components of social order.[33] He also observed something that matters in a hard conversation: the norm cuts both ways. A person who feels they have been given something feels bound to return it. A person who feels they are being manoeuvred into an obligation they did not choose feels, with equal force, the injustice of it.

Every hard conversation about the gift economy is a conversation in which the other person is checking which of these is happening. So the principle beneath every script is the one Chapter 3 drew from the potlatch: the conversation itself must be refusable. Say what you propose, say what it is not, say what the other

person is free to decline, and mean it. A proposal that cannot be turned down without cost is not a gift and will not be received as one, however it is framed.

The board

What they are worried about. That this is a cost without a return, that it rests on soft science, and that it will be hard to stop once started.

What not to do. Do not open with the neurochemistry of trust. Chapter 3 set out why: the oxytocin findings have not replicated well, and a board member who knows that will stop listening. Do not promise an outcome. Do not present the gift economy as a lever that will raise productivity by a predictable amount. None of these is supported, and the board will be right to discount the rest of what you say if you claim them.

What to say first. The cost the board is not seeing.

> *"Before we talk about anything new, I want to show you a cost we are already paying and not recording. Last year we lost [number] people from this unit, [number] of them after their first year. On a conservative estimate of what it costs to replace someone, that is [figure] a year. That figure is not in any budget line. It is in recruitment, training, overtime and the mistakes new people make."*

This is Chapter 6's True Cost of a Wage, and it does the work Cascio's article did: it challenges the assumption that labour rates equal labour costs, using the board's own figures.

What to say second. What the evidence supports, and what it does not.

> *"The research on this is mixed in an instructive way. Paying people more on its own, without a relationship behind it, tends to produce a strong first effect that fades. What holds up better is the combination: pay that people regard as fair, gifts that are chosen for them and come with no strings, and not undermining what they already do with incentives that tell them we don't trust them. There is a large body of research linking this kind of discretionary effort to unit productivity, lower costs and lower turnover. Most of it is correlational. I am not promising you a number."*

What to say third. What is proposed, its cost, and how it can be stopped.

> *"I am proposing a thirteen-week sequence in one unit. Its cost is [figure]: [corrections, gifts, time]. The first six weeks change nothing except to look and listen. If at week six we find that we cannot close the gaps in pay, we stop and report. At week thirteen we will report what*

> *changed, what we measured, what else happened in the same period, and what we can and cannot tell. You can stop it at any of those points."*

If they ask for individual metrics. This is the moment Chapter 9 prepared for.

> *"We will report everything at the level of the unit. We will not break the gift-economy figures out by person, and I'd ask you not to want us to. The evidence is clear that once people know their helpfulness is being scored individually, it starts to measure competition for the score rather than the help. You can hold me accountable for the unit's results. That is where the accountability belongs."*

If they say it is soft. Agree with the part that is true and correct the part that is not.

> *"Some of what is written about this is soft, including some of what our own sources say about hormones. The part I am relying on is not. It is the experimental and field evidence on what happens when you put a price on something people were doing for free. It has turned up in laboratory experiments, in day-care centres and, among women, in blood donation. The usual finding is that the behaviour you were paying for goes down."*

The union

What they are worried about. That generosity is a prelude to something worse; that gifts will be used to avoid a pay negotiation; that a programme about goodwill is a programme about extracting more unpaid effort.

Each of these has happened often enough to be a reasonable expectation. Ford's five-dollar day came with investigators in the home. The gift that substitutes for fair pay, so that asking for a raise feels like ingratitude, is the commonest workplace form of the gift that dominates.

What to say first. The contract comes first, and the contract is theirs to negotiate.

> *"I want to start with what this is not. It is not a substitute for pay. The first thing the sequence does, before anything is offered as a gift, is check every role against the market, against what we've promised, and against what others doing the same work are paid, and close the gaps through the contract. I'd like you to see those comparisons and tell me if we have the sources wrong."*

What to say second. What will not be asked.

> *"Nothing in this asks anyone to do more unpaid work. The gifts are things people asked for, they come with no conditions, and anyone can turn them down. We are not adding any measure of individual effort. If anything, we'll be removing measures people tell us get in the way."*

What to offer. A role.

> *"One of the roles in the sequence is a sceptic, whose job is to ask at every step what could go wrong and what people will hear. I'd welcome someone you nominate in that role. They'll see everything the stewards see."*

The offer of the sceptic's role is the most important line in this conversation. It turns the union from an audience into a participant, and it gives the people most likely to spot the gift that dominates the means to stop it.

If they say no. Accept it, and say what you will do instead.

> *"That's understood. We'll go ahead with the corrections regardless, because people are owed them. We'll share the listening findings with you, without names. And the offer stands."*

A partner firm

What they are worried about. That a proposal to "work more as partners" is a request for favours without payment, and that goodwill will be drawn on until it runs out.

Gift economies between firms are real. Chapter 2's audit for a firm and its suppliers usually finds them: the early warning of a price change, the order expedited without a fee, the draft forecast shared before it is final. They are also fragile in a particular way, because each firm answers to its own owners and the line between partnership and exploitation is easy to cross.

What to say first. Name what is already given, specifically, and receive it.

> *"Before we talk about anything new, I want to say what we've noticed. When our order slipped in March, your team moved us up the queue without charging for it. That kept a client of ours. We didn't say so at the time, and we should have."*

This is Mauss's second obligation, receiving, and it is the most disarming thing one firm can do for another. Almost nobody does it.

What to say second. What you can offer, separated from what you are contracting for.

> *"We'd like to keep the contract exactly as it is, priced fairly, and separately to offer something we think is useful to you: [an early view of our forecast, access to our training, a named contact who answers within a day]. There's nothing attached to it. If it isn't useful, say so and we'll stop."*

What not to do. Do not propose a gift in the same breath as a price negotiation. A gift offered in a negotiation is read as a concession to be traded, and it will be.

The sceptical colleague

What they are worried about. That this is sentimental; that it distracts from the work; that the people who give most will be exploited further, or that the people who give least will be rewarded.

The sceptical colleague is often the most valuable person in the room, because their objections are usually specific. Give them the sceptic's role formally, as Chapter 8 recommends, and the conversation changes from opposition to contribution.

What to say.

> *"I'd like you to be the person whose job is to tell us where this goes wrong. You don't have to believe in it. Read the chapter on what the evidence doesn't support, and then watch everything we do for those mistakes. If you see us making one, say so, and we'll stop and fix it."*

If they say the generous will be exploited. Agree, and show them the map.

> *"That's the biggest risk, and it's the first thing we look for. The map in week two marks the people whose giving isn't coming back. They're the first people we listen to."*

If they say free riders will be rewarded. Show them the immune system.

> *"Some of the people taking more than they give are new, or carrying something at home, and they'll give back later. Some aren't. The sequence separates the two, and part of it is building a way for the team to raise a broken obligation openly and quickly. Not a sanction from me. A conversation the team owns."*

A family

The last conversation is the hardest, because the stakes are personal and nobody in a family thinks of what they do as an economy. Chapter 11 is devoted to households; this is the conversation that opens the subject.

What they are worried about. That being asked about money and gifts is an accusation: of ingratitude, of taking too much, of keeping score.

What not to do. Do not begin with a ledger. Do not begin with a grievance. And do not begin by describing the family as an economy; it will be heard as a reduction of the family to one.

What to say first. Receive.

> *"I've been thinking about everything you do that nobody sees. [Name it specifically: the remembering of birthdays, the calls to Mum, the paperwork every April.] I don't think I've ever said that I notice it. I do."*

Santa Anna's *Spiritual Abundance* series describes the recognition that one-way giving produces in the giver: "When you notice yourself consistently offering while rarely receiving, your natural recalibration isn't selfishness—it's recognition that one-directional flow creates imbalance." Opening with receiving is how a family member who has been on the other side of that imbalance learns that it has been seen.

What to say second. Separate what is owed from what is given.

> *"There are a few things I think we've mixed up. [The money from Gran's house, which was meant to be shared.] That isn't a gift; it's something you're owed, and I'd like to sort it out plainly. The help I've been giving with the deposit is a gift, and I want it to be one, which means it shouldn't come with my opinions about where you live."*

What to say third. Ask.

> *"Is there something that would actually help more than what I've been doing? It doesn't have to be money."*

That is the question Maren asked her kitchen, the question Chapter 8's listeners ask, and the question the retraining family in Chapter 11 asks its daughter. In each place it does the same work. It turns a gift designed by the giver into a gift designed for the receiver, and it makes the whole exchange refusable.

When the conversation fails

Some of these conversations will fail. The board will decline. The union will say no. The partner will treat the gift as a concession. The family member will hear an accusation however carefully the words are chosen.

A failed conversation is not the end of the gift economy. It is information about where the line is closed, and from which side. *Ecstatic Economics* says of its own practices that "these practices are not magic", and

the same is true here. What can be done after a failed conversation is what the scripts have tried to do throughout: say what is true, close any gap in what is owed regardless, leave the offer standing without pressing it, and receive whatever is given in the meantime. Lines reopen, often from the other side, when the person who refused finds that nothing was withdrawn as a result.

The Tool: The Conversation Plan

A one-page plan to complete before any of the conversations above. It takes twenty minutes.

1. Who, and what are they right to worry about? Write it as they would say it, not as you would.
2. What will I receive first? One specific thing this person or group has given, named exactly.
3. What is owed, and is it being paid? If not, what will I say about closing the gap?
4. What am I offering beyond what is owed? Can it be declined without cost? Does it carry any condition?
5. What will I not claim? List the claims the evidence does not support that I might be tempted to make.
6. What is their way out? Write the sentence that tells them they can say no, and what will happen if they do.
7. What will I do if they say no? Write it now, so that the answer to a refusal is not improvised.

After the conversation, add one line: what did I learn about where the line is closed?

References

1. Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review*, 25(2), 161–178. https://doi.org/10.2307/2092623. A theoretical paper; its claim of universality rests on the comparative literature of its time, and it is paraphrased here, not quoted.

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